

Audio Transcript
Episode 189 of "[E&P Reports](#)" Vodcast Series
with *Mike Blinder*

The banner features the E&P Reports Vodcast logo on the left, a central URL EditorandPublisher.com/Vodcasts, and a microphone icon on the right. Below the URL are three video thumbnails: one showing David Cook and Richard G. Ballentine at a table, and another showing Mike Blinder speaking into a microphone. The E&P logo is also present in the top right of the banner area.

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[Ballentine enters a Gannett “ghost paper” town, starting a five-day-a-week free, printed tabloid.](#)

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In this episode of "E&P Reports," we explore the Tri-City Record, a new, five-day-a-week free publication serving San Juan County, New Mexico, being launched by Ballentine Communications, the owners of the Durango (CO) Herald. We learn from board chairman/ owner Richard G. Ballentine and new Record Publisher David Cook why they believe there is a real opportunity for expansion into this area already served by an existing Gannett title since that paper has drastically cut back on staff and content over the past few years.

0:00:03.8 Announcer: This is E&P Reports, a vodcast from Editor and Publisher Magazine, the authoritative voice of news media since 1884, serving newspapers, broadcast, digital, and all forms of news publishing.

0:00:19.9 Mike Blinder: And greetings once again, Mike Blinder, publisher E&P Magazine. As always, we urge our audience if listening on a podcast platform to follow us. Watching us on the YouTube channel, there is a subscribe button below, there is a bell to the right, click those suckers and you'll get an update each and every time we upload a new episode of E&P Reports. I'm gonna take you to the... Okay, guys, I lived there in 1982, we called Grand Junction, the Western Slope. Are you Western Slope folks or Southwest... What do you call your area of Colorado, down there in Durango?

0:00:58.4 David Cook: We're even more Western Slope than Grand Junction. Our mountains are higher.

0:01:04.4 MB: We're gonna take you there now because we're chatting with Richard G. Ballantine, chairman of the Board of Ballantine Communications. Richard, have we ever met? I've been to Colorado Press many times, have you and I ever crossed paths?

0:01:17.5 **Richard G. Ballentine**: Well, you probably were in the front of the room and I was somewhere in the middle, but I'm sure we have.

0:01:24.5 MB: It's an honour to meet you, sir. Ballantine Communications has a long history. My God. Was it your parents or grandparents who put this whole puppy together?

0:01:37.6 RB: Parents, really. We were in Minneapolis, and this was 1952 and my parents wanted to own a newspaper, and Durango looked like a promising place to settle in with four children. Few of the streets were paved. Took a DC-3 to get here.

0:01:53.0 MB: And now, if you really research your company and your family and yourself, you're also a member of the Colorado Humanities Council, Crow Canyon Archaeological Center. You also have a family fund where you do philanthropy for the Southwest Colorado area. It's fascinating, sir, it's an honor to have you on the program. And with you is another gentleman I'd like to learn a little bit more about. David Cook, you are the owner still of the Aspen Daily News, sir?

0:02:26.4 DC: That's correct, yes.

0:02:28.0 MB: Okay, let me get this straight, you own the Aspen Daily News, you're Colorado based, and now you're working with Richard here and the Ballantine family to start a brand new news operation in Northern New Mexico. How does that happen? Why are you leaving Aspen? What is going on with you, sir?

0:02:47.3 DC: I'll take a little shortcut, as to not bore your viewers here, but if you have more questions after my answer, we can dig in a little bit, but it was started as a very happy accident. I started engaging with the Board of Directors of Ballantine Communications and was brought on to

do a little consulting project for Ballantine to just identify opportunity and identify areas of growth. And a lot of that time was spent in Northern New Mexico, in the Farmington and San Juan region. Simultaneously, there was a very clear thirst and need for more community-oriented beat reporting, and I brought that news back to the Board of Directors, and along came the boom sound of the Tri-City Record. And I have been tasked with the launch and very happy to say that yesterday it was quite literally our first print edition. And it was accepted by the community with open arms, so we will continue to push on this thing until it's a more structured and foundational part of the community.

0:03:55.0 MB: We're gonna be exploring the birth of the Tri-City Record, a brand new five-day-a-weeker free tabloid newspaper serving a community in Northern New Mexico, just South of the border of Colorado. And we're gonna do that with David Cook, the new publisher of the Tri-City Record. And we're gonna do it of course, with Richard G. Ballantine, the Chairman of the Board of Ballantine Communications, all after this message.

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0:05:28.0 MB: All right, I wanna first, gentlemen... I guess, let me start with you then, Richard, since you were doing the due diligence in a town called Farmington, New Mexico. But how could you have the unmitigated goal to walk in to Farmington, where the Farmington Daily Times is owned by Gannett and still... Are they still publishing? I mean, gimme the real skinny here. Why are you moving into this market with a new newspaper entity?

0:05:53.0 RB: Well, The Daily Times is a good deal smaller, as you might expect, given what Gannett is doing around the country. But they brought this idea of a tabloid to us, the idea of it being free, a couple of things that we'd had no experience at, which sounded like a real possibility, a real opportunity to deliver some broader coverage into Northwestern New Mexico. Not only through [0:06:20.7] _____ county, that county, but allow us to write on a broader scale about some of the regional issues in recreation, public lands, water, employment, that kind of thing. And that wasn't taking place and it looked as though it was an opportunity for us.

0:06:41.4 MB: But, E&P just published a pretty in-depth story we're calling Ghost Papers. That's why the timing of this is fascinating. Gretchen Peck, our contributing editor explored different cities where, the term now is a new one. We've had news deserts, now we've got ghost papers where you may find one person left in the shop. I researched the Farmington Daily Times. I see one name on the entire staff directory to serve a community of what, 46,000 in the city and even a larger population in the county. Is that true? Are you actually coming into a ghost town when it comes to news? Again, I don't want you trashing the competition, but is that the main reason that you think that this town desperately needs a new voice?

0:07:29.6 RB: We certainly think we can provide a good deal more coverage than readers and members of those communities are receiving now. I'm not sure of the staff size, I'm not sure, and those larger companies have a way of moving content around, and some of it's quite good. But we see an opportunity to do this a little differently and do it closer to home for the residence of Farmington.

0:07:56.1 DC: And Mike, real quick, I'll just add that the decision was made was totally independent of Gannett's engagement with San Juan County. We identified a need in the community that was completely, as I said, independent of what's happening in that shop. But we're very proud. I think regional relevance is so important and because Richard and his family have something in Durango, in Cortez, there are some real regional relevance and significance and it gives us an opportunity to really focus on the Four Corners region in the greater San Juan County area. So to me, I've been asked this question a couple of times and the truth of the matter is, it really didn't have anything to do with the Daily Times. Farmington's not in their name anymore, just to be perfectly and accurate, it's just called the Daily Times. They actually locked Farmington off their flag. So needless to say I have heard the term and in mass that certainly has been shrinking. But what we did was a foundational component of growth within the Ballantine organization. It had nothing to do with Gannett.

0:09:08.0 MB: Politically well said sir. And I'm no means pushing you, but, okay. So here we are now, let me explain to our viewers and listeners. And for those of you that are watching the YouTube channel, you're seeing a map now of the area. Farmington is a city one-hour South of Durango that's just across the Colorado border. And gentlemen, correct me if I'm wrong, you're about two hours away from Albuquerque, correct? Just Albuquerque's a little Southeast. Am I correct, gentlemen?

0:09:36.1 DC: Three from Farmington. And I think by the way, Mike, I think countries have borders. I think states have state lines. [laughter] Sorry. Sorry.

0:09:46.7 MB: I apologize. Thank you so much. I always, I don't mind being corrected as a publisher. All right. Now I gotta talk to you about this then, Richard. So, or David 'cause you were consulting this whole... Looking at the marketplace. Gannett is spinning stuff off. Did any of you guys give Gannett a call and say, hey, there's an existing brand, an existing database, maybe an existing social media presence? That brand there is what, maybe a hundred years old, did you look at exploring of maybe absorbing it or you wanted to go with a whole new presence in the town? Am I allowed to ask that question, Richard?

0:10:22.9 RB: Well, our exploration was done relatively quickly and we didn't get any positive response so...

0:10:33.4 MB: Okay. Well said. So then with all that being said now, let's look at the market you're into. There's a TV station there doing news as well, I'm I correct? Or is that just a sub-carrier of maybe something of Albuquerque?

0:10:48.8 DC: Sub, sub, sub.

0:10:48.9 MB: A sub, sub, sub. Okay. So basically...

0:10:52.4 DC: There's one very, very small newsroom, a broadcast newsroom for radio broadcast national radio. But there's literally no beat reporters in the greater San Juan region. So Mike Easterling is the name on the Daily Times masthead. And he's the last GA's reporter for USA Today network out there. But truly in my exploration through the ecosystem, there was no county beat reporters, city beat reporters, cops and courts, education, all the environments, A and E, all the important things to a community of that size, and especially a community that's trying to re-identify it's true identity. So it's just a prime time to insert some editorial fire power.

0:11:47.5 MB: Dave, and when you went into the city, I assume you met with civic leaders, you discussed, you checked out the potential business for this new entity. What kind of feedback did you get from the business community? Did people say to you, hell get in here quick and save us. I'm not trying to put words in your mouth, but are you getting a welcome, warm response for going into this area that has an existing voice, granted much less than it used to be, and making such a major commitment? We're now discussing five days a week of print guys. That's absurd in today's world. You're going in major league now you're putting a staff of 12 in there. What kind of response is the business community giving you with this kind of commitment?

0:12:33.7 DC: Yeah, I don't wanna exaggerate or be hyperbolic. It's literally been unanimously positive from the reader's perspective. We will have no problem whatsoever finding committed readers that will support us. There haven't been a free tabloid ad supported paper in that market maybe ever. And so how the business community responds is truly what remains to be seen. And this is a model that we're launching with and trying, but we'll pivot as necessary. The important thing is to give this community a new source that they can trust and they can rely on. So I believe it's a format that can work and I feel certain... So I've met with a hundred businesses, tons of civic leaders, the college, the hospital, all the institutional businesses, in the greater San Juan county region. And from a support standpoint, specifically editorially, we have a tremendous, obviously support has been wild, overwhelming. Something that needs to be mentioned too is we've had a phone directory in that marketplace for a long time. How many years?

0:13:46.4 RB: Since the early 80s.

0:13:48.4 DC: So since the early 80s, we've done a phone directory called Directory Plus in the San Juan County region. And so we have a sales team that is wildly experienced and knows the business community very, very well. We had some, what they call unfair advantages in the startup world that allow us... So many things have to line up in order to start a news product. There's no space on any press in the United States right now.

0:14:18.3 MB: I Know.

0:14:18.4 DC: We got lucky to find a printing hold that worked for us in Santa Fe. We got lucky with our regional significance. It has to be the right time as far as opportunity. So much has to go right in order to be the right time to strike. But at the same time, hyperlocal news in some communities like this, the importance is at an all time high. That's what a lot of people don't understand. And some metropolitan dailies continue to struggle or find their footing. What's really rising right now in our business is that of hyperlocal dailies, because they realize there's only one place to get that information. So I'm very, very bullish on the next sort of period of time for hyperlocal daily specifically.

0:15:00.9 MB: This is where I wanna ask that question again. So David, when you put your sales team out there, you've mentioned a lot about reader acceptance. Have you had pledges from large businesses to keep you in business saying you support our town and we'll support you? How is it looking for sales is what I'm saying and advertising?

0:15:21.8 DC: Yeah, we've had a great response out of the gates. All the people that support us out of the gates are true news junkies. I think the town certainly has been beaten down a little bit as it relates to products coming in, leaving, not committing, not being reliable. And that's why I've identified our core principles. And reliability is certainly one of those, but it's really important that we're there. And so make no mistake that a lot of big advertisers and supporters, they wanna see a little track record before they jump in with two feet and support us with the 52-week contract. We'll have to prove ourselves and do the good work, but we're certainly prepared to do that. People don't jump in blind anymore for anything. You need to feel as convinced and hopeful that your money's going to support an organization that's gonna be truthful and reliable and committed to your community that you're serving. Don't get me wrong, we're not where we need to be, but yes, the initial response has been very positive, but a lot of that is in word only right now. I think as our track record will continue to prove itself, we'll have more and more folks jump in.

0:16:38.8 MB: Ballantine communications, Durango Colorado, moving into Northern New Mexico to a town called Farmington, a county called San Juan with a five day a weeker, 7,000 a day print run, free tabloid, I assume online free. Everything's wide open. Is that correct, Dave out of the box? You're not charging for access, correct?

0:17:06.3 DC: Out of the box, I have a very strong belief that in order to create reader habits, you need to make sure there is no friction points between the citizens and the news product. How it looks in three, six months time will tell, but out of the gates, there is absolutely no friction point between the reader and the content.

0:17:26.3 MB: There you go. And I'm sure you're working diligently as well at looking at any other ways to... How should I say, expand and grow and keep that region vibrant. So gentlemen, I wanna thank you both for your valuable time. If anyone wants more information, the Tri-City Records website, is tricityrecordnm.com, newmexico.com, tricityrecordnm.com. Ballantine Communications also has a website. Just search for it. And Richard and David, thanks for your valuable time. It was great to have you on the program today.

0:18:00.6 RB: Good questions and we would like to see it come up for a bit.

0:18:03.8 DC: Mike, thank you so much. Really great to talk with you.